



File Code: 1950

Date: June 1, 2017

Dear Friends and Neighbors of the St. Joe Ranger District:

The St. Joe Ranger District is designing a prescribed burn project in the Snow Peak Wildlife Management Area (WMA). You are receiving this letter because we would like to receive public input early in the project design process. So far, a coarse analysis of the existing forest conditions in the project area have been conducted, and we have identified about 17,260 acres of potential treatment areas. Preliminary boundaries for nine burn areas in addition to 10 beetle kill pockets have been delineated and are shown on attached maps.

The Snow Peak project area is approximately 37,412 acres and encompasses the entire Snow Peak WMA. The project area is comprised of 25,660 acres of National Forest Service (NFS) lands. The 2015 Idaho Panhandle National Forest Land Management plan identifies four Management Areas within the project area.

1. Backcountry – 18,470 acres.
  - Desired Condition- Natural ecological processes and disturbances are the primary forces affecting the composition, structure, and pattern of vegetation. The use of fire also serves as the primary tool for trending the vegetation toward the desired conditions as well as serving other important ecosystem functions.
  - Guideline - Natural, unplanned ignitions, as well as planned ignitions, may be used to meet resource objectives.
2. Recommended Wilderness (Mallard Larkins) – 5,780 acres.
  - Desired Condition- Natural ecological processes and disturbances are the primary forces affecting the composition, structure, and pattern of vegetation. Fire also plays an increased role as a natural disturbance agent.
  - Guideline - Planned ignitions may be used as a tool for ecosystem restoration purposes where the need is linked to human-induced changes caused by factors such as fire suppression.
3. General Forest – 770 acres
  - Desired Condition - Vegetation management activities have a dominant role in affecting the composition, structure, and pattern of vegetation. These management activities trend the vegetation towards the desired conditions. Although natural ecological processes and disturbances are still present, they are influenced more by human activity in this MA than in others.
  - Guideline – Fuels are reduced to reduce the threat of wildland fire.
4. Eligible Wild and Scenic River (Little North Fork of the Clearwater River – Eligible Wild River Segment) – 640 acres
  - Desired Condition- Natural ecological processes (e.g., plant succession) and disturbances (e.g., floods, fire, insects, and disease) are the primary forces affecting the composition, structure, and pattern of vegetation in eligible wild river segments.

Fire also plays an increased role as a natural disturbance agent in eligible wild river segments.

- Guideline - Planned ignitions may be used as a tool for ecosystem restoration purposes where the need is linked to human-induced changes caused by factors such as fire suppression.

There is also 11,752 acres of State of Idaho lands administered by the Idaho Department of Fish and Game (IDFG) within the project area. Improving elk habitat has been identified as one of the priorities of the Snow Peak WMA.

### **Purpose and Need**

Much of Snow Peak WMA burned in 1910 and again in 1926. However the lack of fire in the last 85 years has allowed the establishment of dense understories of shade-tolerant conifers and conifer encroachment on south aspects and other drier areas that otherwise would have been maintained in a more open state. Shrub, grass, and forbs have been crowded out by conifer encroachment which has reduced available big game browse. In addition, the existing shrub species preferred by big game have become decadent and less palatable. Prescribed burning will regenerate decadent shrubs as well as increase shrub, grass, and forb availability.

This project is intended to:

Improve browse conditions for big game species by regenerating the decadent shrub component as well as increasing palatable shrub, grass, and forb availability in the Snow Peak WMA. As a secondary benefit, heavy concentrations of dead and down fuel will be reduced, allowing for greater probability of success of control of unwanted fires that display uncharacteristic fire effects. In addition to fuel reduction, reducing stand density and creating a variable stand structure with multi storied stands, would reduce the likelihood of large scale outbreaks of insects and disease in the future.

### **Proposed Action**

Prescribed fire to improve big game forage, reduce natural fuels, and improve stand conditions is being proposed. Prescribed fire is planned on NFS lands as well as IDFG lands. Burn areas were designated by wildlife biologists (both US Forest Service and Idaho Department of Fish and Game) and US Forest Service burn bosses. Areas were selected based on vegetation conditions and topography. Approximately 17,260 acres have been identified for prescribed fire. Of those acres, about 2,280 acres are located in areas heavily impacted by mountain pine beetles; the other 14,980 acres are areas that wildlife biologists identified for big game browse improvements where burn bosses felt they could achieve desired conditions.



Figure 1. Looking at Snow Peak from Surveyors Ridge Trail



Figure 2. Picture of the 2015 Caribou Fire (212 acres) from Snow Peak Lookout

Annual acreage burned would vary due to budget, weather, fuel conditions, and to accommodate design criteria/mitigations. Lightning-caused fires occurring within the delineated burn areas may be used to meet the purpose and need of this project if they occur within the prescriptive parameters described in the decision document and the subsequent burn plan(s).

No road construction is required and there would be no changes to existing roads. No commercial products would be removed. Trees would not be cut, except where required as a

point-protection design feature around certain improvements or cultural resources. The cutting of these trees would fall under provision 294.24(c)(vii) of the Idaho Roadless Rule, *Where incidental to the implementation of a management activity not otherwise prohibited by this subpart*. This does not require Regional Forester approval; however, effects to roadless characteristics will be considered. Snags would only be felled for safety reasons.

Planned containment methods include ignition patterns, timing, and natural barriers including topographic features and fuel conditions. In the event that planned containment methods are not effective in keeping fire from moving out of burn areas, holding actions, adhering to minimum impact suppression tactics (MIST) (Incident Response Pocket Guide, NFES #1007, 2006), may be utilized to protect resources (i.e. – multi-story hare habitat for lynx, cultural resources, sensitive plant populations, etc.) if all hazards can be safely mitigated. The intent of MIST is to suppress a wildfire with the least impact to the land.

For public safety, efforts would be made to inform the public of planned burning via press releases, signs, and public contacts. Of particular concern are burn areas with trails, or burning when the public is more likely to be in the area, such as during hunting season or on weekends. Trail closures or area closures may be put in place if deemed necessary to protect public safety during burning operations. In regards to air quality, the Montana/Idaho Airshed Management System would be implemented which takes into consideration the predicted weather forecast and smoke dispersion for the planned day or days of burn operations. Overall, the prescribed fire burn plans would address specific plans to maintain public safety as well as the safety of firefighters.

### **Known Issues for Consideration**

A number of issues within this project were identified during an internal scoping process which we want you to know about. They are listed below. All issues have the potential to be resolved, either through mitigation measures which would be part of the design criteria for the project, or through avoidance of the area in question.

- The project area is located entirely within the Mallard Larkins roadless area.
- The Little North Fork of the Clearwater River is an Eligible Wild and Scenic River. Unit 4 borders the ‘wild’ designation portion of the river.
- Mountain pine beetle has heavily affected lodgepole pine stands in the area.
- Bull trout, a threatened species, is known to occur within the project. The Little North Fork of the Clearwater River, Canyon Creek, and Buck Creek are considered critical habitat for bull trout.
- Canada lynx, a threatened species may also occur within the project area. There are two lynx analysis units within the project area. Lynx habitat does occur within potential treatment areas.

### **Categorical Exclusion (CE)**

The proposed activities fall into a category of actions that may be excluded from documentation in an environmental assessment (EA), or environmental impact statement (EIS), and preliminary analysis indicates the project would not result in extraordinary

circumstances. The Snow Peak Rx Burn project falls within the following category (36 CFR 220.6(e)(6)):

*(6) Timber stand and/or wildlife habitat improvement activities that do not include the use of herbicides or do not require more than 1 mile of low standard road construction.*

## Comments

I invite your comments on this proposal. I am the responsible official for this project and I will consider all public comments before making a decision. Submitted comments should provide specific facts, along with supporting reasons, which you believe should be considered in reaching a decision.

Please send written comments to:

Snow Peak Rx Burn  
Attn: Kris Hennings  
St. Joe Ranger District  
222 S. 7<sup>th</sup> St., Suite 1  
St. Maries, ID 83861

Oral comments must be provided at my office during normal business hours (8:00 am – 4:30 pm, Monday through Friday, excluding holidays) via telephone (208-243-2531) or in person, or if during non-business hours, must be at an official agency function (such as a public meeting) which is designed to elicit public comment. All comments must be submitted by July 3, 2017. If we do not hear from you, you will not receive further correspondence regarding this project.

Electronic comments may be submitted to [comments-northern-idpanhandle@fs.fed.us](mailto:comments-northern-idpanhandle@fs.fed.us). The subject line must contain the name of the project: Snow Peak Rx Burn. Electronic comments should be submitted in rtf, MS Word or portable document format. Comments should include name, address, phone number, and organization represented.

Comments received in response to this solicitation, including names and address of those who comment will be considered part of the public record and will be available for public inspection. Those who respond to this solicitation will be notified when a decision is made.

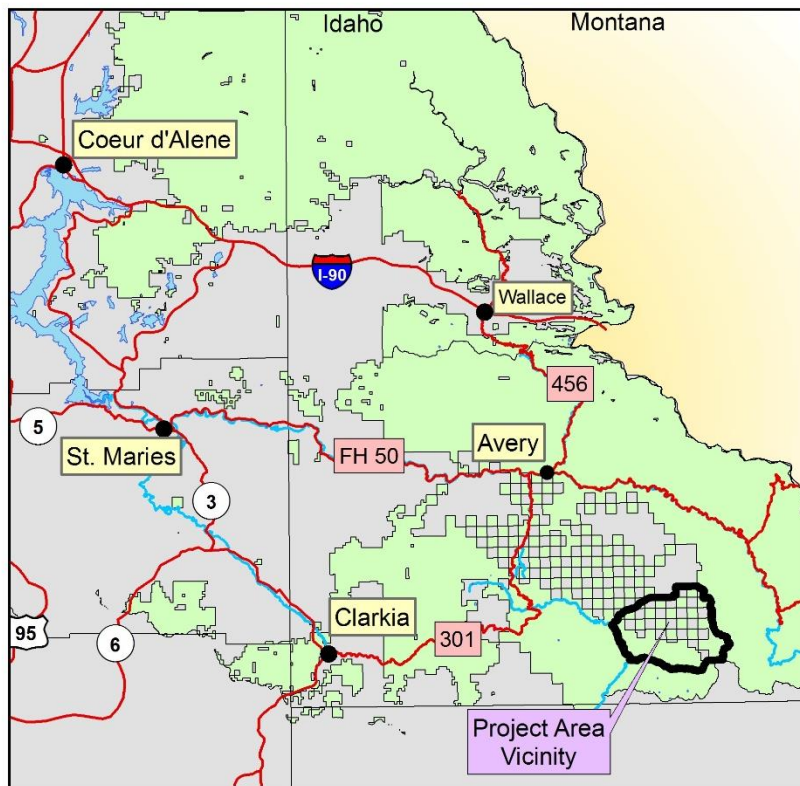
If you would like more information about this proposal, please contact Kris Hennings, Interdisciplinary Team Leader (208-263-5111) or via email ([krhennings@fs.fed.us](mailto:krhennings@fs.fed.us)).

Sincerely,

/s/ Matthew A. Davis

Matthew A. Davis  
St. Joe District Ranger





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## Snow Peak Wildlife Management Area Vicinity and Project Area Map

